The Consumer Frontier: Household Consumption in Early Kentucky

Elizabeth A. Perkins

The image was an appealing one: sturdy pioneers leaving behind the comforts of civilization to carve out new lives in the trans-Appalachian wilderness. They lived simply, in log houses, surrounded by fields that produced all needed food and the raw materials for clothing and domestic furnishings; neighbors informally exchanged the labor and goods necessary to sustain the local community. Thus the frontier traditionally was portrayed as a region of virtuous and self-sufficient yeomen. Over the decades, frontier women and men became part of the national myth—the wellsprings of democracy and military strength, but most of all, of cultural and economic independence.

The frontier myth can be traced to the revolutionary era, when republicans hoped agrarian simplicity would preserve the virtue of the new nation. Thomas Jefferson, for example, envisioned the trans-Appalachian West settled by generations of independent farmers who would form the backbone of American liberty. Self-sufficiency on the land would lead to self-reliance in the political arena; freed from commercial entanglements, the western settlers would orient their interests to the good of the commonwealth rather than the demands of the marketplace.[1] By the end of the nineteenth century, the frontier myth looked backward rather than forward in time. Romanticized images of early American life—born of crowded, scrambling cities and mechanized, dehumanized workplaces—created for the western settlements a lost golden age of subsistence farms, communal work activities, and wholesome precapitalist values.[2]

Elizabeth A. Perkins is a doctoral candidate in the Department of History at Northwestern University. An earlier version of this article was presented at the 1987 annual meeting of the Southern Historical Association. The author gratefully acknowledges the encouragement and insightful criticism of T. H. Breen, Lois Green Carr, Ronald Cohen, Toby Ditz, Karen Halttunen, James C. Klotter, Allan Kulikoff, Nancy Tomes, Robert H. Wiebe, and the editorial staff and referees of the *Journal of American History*.

[1] Thomas Jefferson, *Notes on the State of Virginia*, ed. William Peden (New York, 1954), 164–65. On Jefferson's "yeoman imperialism," see Robert H. Wiebe, *The Opening of American Society: From the Adoption of the Constitution to the Eve of Disunion* (New York, 1984), 131–38.

[2] For a sensitively nuanced reprise of the theme of rural communalism, see John Mack Faragher, *Sugar Creek: Life on the Illinois Prairie* (New Haven, 1986). On a community where early participation in commercial farming did not preclude development of a strong communal ethos, see Durwood Dunn, *Cades Cove: The Life and Death of a Southern Appalachian Community, 1818–1937* (Knoxville, 1988). For an innovative study that explores the nostalgic refashioning of local historical narratives, see T. H. Breen, *Imagining the Past: East Hampton Histories* (Reading, Mass., 1989).

Evidence mounts, however, that the nonmarket ethos of early Americans has been greatly exaggerated; recent scholarship suggests that the absorption of peripheral regions into a larger European economic sphere affected native and settler alike. A lively debate now exists over the timing and extent of involvement, as well as the mentality of Americans drawn into an expanding capitalist world economy. For native Americans, the debate has centered on the fur trade: Did Indian tribes willingly overhunt the beaver and other game animals because they desired European manufactured goods, or for reasons related to their own cosmology?[3] For colonial farmers the character of rural economic exchange is at issue: Did a capitalist ideology arrive with the first settlers or transform the countryside only after a protracted "transition to capitalism"?[4] That the truth in each of these cases likely lies closer to the former position in no way diminishes the insight that profit-maximizing *homo economicus* has not been the only actor on the stage of history. Indeed, as Allan Kulikoff has recently suggested, some "judicious synthesis" of these positions—recognizing the coexistence of capitalist commodity markets and local systems of mutuality and exchange—may now be in order.[5]

Although several recent studies have employed elegant theoretical models to shed light on patterns of frontier economic development, we still know relatively little about the everyday economic activities of eighteenth-century backcountry inhabitants.[6] Were Americans on the frontier, as various historians have postulated, latent entrepreneurs or security-seeking agrarians, or perhaps something else? What about their roles as consumers? Did border women and men escape the consumer revolution that swept Britain and Anglo-America in the eighteenth century, or did they urge it onward?[7]

[3] Calvin Martin, *Keepers of the Game: Indian-Animal Relationships and the Fur Trade* (Berkeley, 1978); and Shepherd Kretch, ed., *Indians, Animals, and the Fur Trade: A Critique of "Keepers of the Game"* (Athens, Ga., 1981). See also Richard White, *The Roots of Dependency: Subsistence, Environment, and Social Change among the Choctaws, Pawnees, and Navajos* (Lincoln, 1983); William Cronon, *Changes in the Land: Indians, Colonists, and the Ecology of New England* (New York, 1983); and Daniel H. Unser, Jr., "The Frontier Exchange Economy of the Lower Mississippi Valley in the Eighteenth Century," *William and Mary Quarterly,* 44 (April 1987), 165–92.

[4] James T. Lemon, *The Best Poor Man's Country: A Geographical Study of Early Southeastern Pennsylvania* (Baltimore, 1972); Michael Merrill, "Cash Is Good to Eat: Self-Sufficiency and Exchange in the Rural Economy of the United States," *Radical History Review,* 3 (Winter 1977), 42–71; James A. Henretta, "Families and Farms: *Mentalité* in Pre-Industrial America," *William and Mary Quarterly,* 35 (Jan. 1978), 3–32; Christopher Clark, "Household Economy, Market Exchange, and the Rise of Capitalism in the Connecticut Valley, 1800–1860," *Journal of Social History,* 13 (Winter 1979), 169–89; Winifred B. Rothenberg, "The Market and Massachusetts Farmers, 1750–1855," *Journal of Economic History,* 41 (June 1981), 283–314; Carole Shammas, "How Self-Sufficient Was Early America?" *Journal of Interdisciplinary History,* 13 (Autumn 1982), 247–72. For an interesting ecological perspective, see Carolyn Merchant, *Ecological Revolutions: Nature, Gender, and Science in New England* (Chapel Hill, 1989).

[5] For a review of this literature, see Allan Kulikoff, "The Transition to Capitalism in Rural America," *William and Mary Quarterly,* 46 (Jan. 1989), 120–44, esp. 128. On the fallacy of assuming a universally "rational" economic man, see Marshall Sahlins, *Stone Age Economics* (New York, 1972), 1–39. Economic behavior can be mediated by culture, according to Calvin Martin, *The American Indian and the Problem of History* (New York, 1987), 3–26.

[6] See, for example, Robert D. Mitchell, *Commercialism and Frontier: Perspectives on the Early Shenandoah Valley* (Charlottesville, 1977); Allan Kulikoff, *Tobacco and Slaves: The Development of Southern Cultures in the Chesapeake, 1680–1800* (Chapel Hill, 1986), esp. 141–57; and D. W. Meinig, *The Shaping of America: A Geographical Perspective on 500 Years of History,* vol. I: *Atlantic America, 1492–1800* (New Haven, 1986), esp. 65–76.

[7] A growing literature has pushed the date of the "birth of a consumer society" back to the eighteenth century (or before), when new production and marketing techniques in Britain enabled more of the population to own

Early Kentucky offers a particularly good setting in which to examine this question. It was America's first West, Jefferson's model for the republican frontier. Settled by yeoman farmers, small planters, and their slaves from western Virginia, Pennsylvania, Maryland, and northwest Carolina during the 1770s and 1780s, Kentucky became a key settlement area bridging the seaboard states and territories farther west.[8] The experiences of Kentucky settlers as they grappled with issues of cultural, economic, and political autonomy and integration—although temporally and spatially specific—may well offer insights into the development of other peripheral regions.

While some of the hardships of early Kentucky undoubtedly have been exaggerated, severe distance constraints did weaken social and material ties with the East; historians have assumed that the Appalachians formed a barrier only slowly penetrated by merchants and consumer goods. In the words of one nineteenth-century chronicler: "Stores and shops were unknown for a long time after the settlement of the country; wooden vessels, prepared by the turner, the cooper, or their rude representatives in the woods, were common substitutes for table furniture. A tin cup was an article of delicate luxury, almost as rare as an iron fork."[9]

Data drawn from a wide variety of local sources—probate inventories, store accounts, tax lists, newspaper advertisements, museum collections, as well as the observations of travelers and inhabitants—permit an investigation of those assumptions and provide a glimpse of consumer life in Kentucky at the end of the eighteenth century. Probate inventories, the best available source for detecting change over time in the habits of consumers, have figured prominently in investigations of colonial living standards and offer a basis for interregional comparisons. Store accounts, although seldom used by historians to study patterns of consumption, constitute direct evidence of consumer behavior and supply valuable information about articles often left out of inventories, such as clothing and haberdashery. Merchant records have their own limitations, of course. Customers who received credit and thus appeared in the account books may not constitute a representative sample of the population, although this can be checked by cross-referencing their tax records. More difficult to address is the problem that some consumers patronized more than one store, with the result that a single account book gives an incomplete

consumer goods. See Joan Thirsk, *Economic Policy and Projects: The Development of a Consumer Society in Early Modern England* (Oxford, 1978); Neil McKendrick, John Brewer, and J. H. Plumb, eds., *The Birth of a Consumer Society* (London, 1982); T. H. Breen, "An Empire of Goods: The Anglicization of Colonial America, 1690–1776," *Journal of British Studies,* 25 (Oct. 1986), 467–99. For the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, there has been lively debate on the hegemonic aspects of a mass consumer culture. See Richard Wightman Fox and T. J. Jackson Lears, eds., *The Culture of Consumption: Critical Essays in American History, 1880–1980* (New York, 1983); William R. Leach, "Transformations in a Culture of Consumption: Women and Department Stores, 1890–1925," *Journal of American History,* 71 (Sept. 1984), 319–42; Warren I. Susman, *Culture as History: The Transformation of American Society in the Twentieth Century* (New York, 1984); and Susan Porter Benson, *Counter Cultures: Saleswomen, Managers, and Customers in American Department Stores, 1890–1940* (Urbana, 1986). For a useful bibliographic essay, see Daniel Horowitz, *The Morality of Spending: Attitudes toward the Consumer Society in America, 1875–1940* (Baltimore, 1985), 187–201.

[8] See Robert D. Mitchell, "The Formation of Early American Cultural Regions: An Interpretation," in James R. Gibson, ed., *European Settlement and Development in North America: Essays on Geographical Change in Honor and Memory of Andrew Hill Clark* (Toronto, 1978), 66–90.

[9] Mann Butler, *Valley of the Ohio* (1853–1855; reprint, Frankfort, 1971), 203.

picture of their consumption habits. Here probate inventories can reveal the overall economic strategies of women and men owning similar wealth.[10] These and other records of local economic behavior allow an examination of three central questions about backcountry consumers: Who were they? What did they buy? How did they transact their business? Material culture analysis and insights from anthropology and sociology assist in exploring one final area of concern: the meaning of frontier consumption. In short, how did western settlers define themselves by and through the goods they bought?

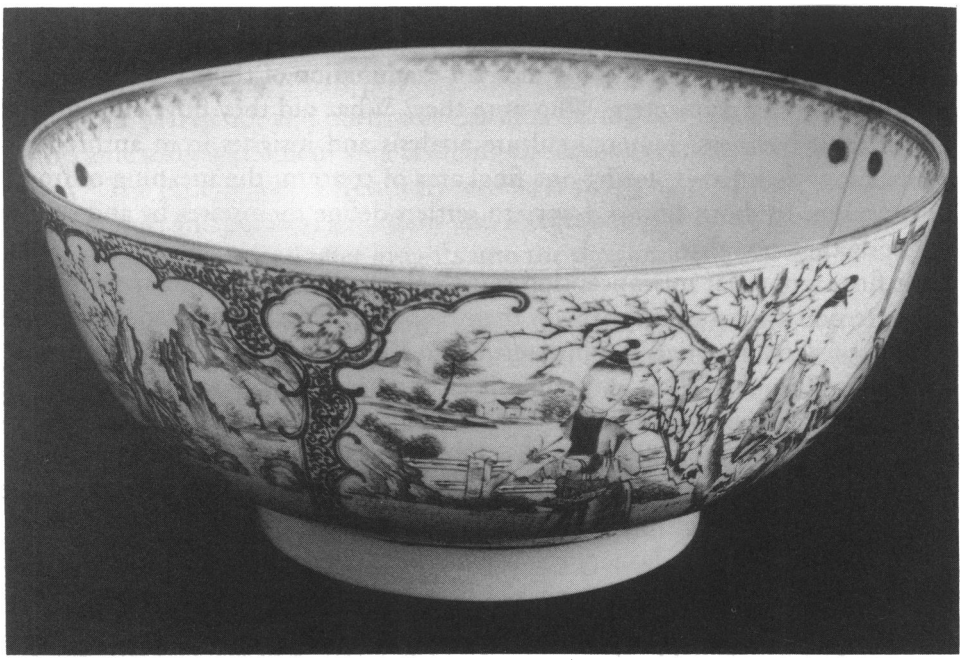
But first, a popular misconception must be dispelled. Backcountry women and men were not thrown completely on their own resources. Stores, traders, and consumer goods accompanied the first settlers to Kentucky. In 1775, the first year of continuous Euro-American settlement, Richard Henderson ran a store at Fort Boonesborough in one of the fort's four log blockhouses, selling various goods on credit. Peddlers, with small stocks of goods on packhorses or in boats, joined the throng moving to Kentucky. A French visitor reported that traders who supplied themselves at Pittsburgh or Wheeling traveled up and down the Ohio River in canoes, conveying "haberdashery goods, and more especially tea and coffee," to settlers on the riverbanks. Tea drinking, the bellwether of an eighteenth-century revolution in consumer tastes, reportedly occurred in the fort at Lexington, although when the women "would take tea together they had nothing but tea and dried buffaloe meat."[11]

Pioneers carried more than the bare essentials for survival, and women, in particular, brought household goods that helped re-create homes they left behind. One settler recalled that in Fort Harrod "almost every housekeeper had some bowl or dish she had brought from the old states, that was kept carefully along with perhaps, a few silver spoons, as proof of her primitive gentility." Mary Walker Holloway transported a China export punch bowl from Rosemont, Virginia, to the struggling settlement of Louisville at the falls of the Ohio; Eliza Cheaney carried an elaborately appliquéd quilt from Virginia to her new home in Woodford County.[12]

[10] On the use of probate records, see Lois Green Carr and Lorena S. Walsh, "Inventories and the Analysis of Wealth and Consumption Patterns in St. Mary's County, Maryland, 1658–1777," *Historical Methods,* 13 (Spring 1980), 81–104. "Toward a History of the Standard of Living in British North America," *William and Mary Quarterly,* 45 (Jan. 1988), 116–70; Shammas, "How Self-Sufficient Was Early America?" 247–72; Carole Shammas, "Consumer Behavior in Colonial America," *Social Science History,* 6 (Winter 1982), 67–86; Gloria L. Main, *Tobacco Colony: Life in Early Maryland, 1650–1720* (Princeton, 1982); John J. McCusker and Russell R. Menard, *The Economy of British America, 1607–1789* (Chapel Hill, 1985), 277–94; Lorena S. Walsh, "Urban Amenities and Rural Sufficiency: Living Standards and Consumer Behavior in the Colonial Chesapeake, 1643–1777," *Journal of Economic History,* 43 (March 1983), 109–17; James T. Lemon, "Household Consumption in Eighteenth-Century America and Its Relationship to Production and Trade: The Situation among Farmers in Southeastern Pennsylvania," *Agricultural History,* 41 (1967), 59–70; Jackson Turner Main, *Society and Economy in Colonial Connecticut* (Princeton, 1985).

[11] Robert S. Cotterill, *History of Pioneer Kentucky* (Cincinnati, 1917), 95; "Letters of General James Wilkinson," *Register of the Kentucky Historical Society,* 24 (Sept. 1926), 261; François André Michaux, *Travels to the West of the Alleghany Mountains in the States of Ohio, Kentucky, and Tennessee . . . ; September 24, 1801–March 26, 1803,* in *Early Western Travels, 1748–1846,* ed. Reuben Gold Thwaites (32 vols., Cleveland, 1904–1907), III, 191–92; Mrs. Phillips interview by John D. Shane, reel 77 (16 CC 291), Draper Manuscripts, microfilm (State Historical Society of Wisconsin, Madison).

[12] Maria T. Daviess, *History of Mercer and Boyle Counties* (Harrodsburg, 1924), 45. The Holloway punch bowl and the Cheaney quilt are in the permanent collection of the Kentucky Historical Society, Frankfort. On the similar



Chinese export punch bowl that Mary Walker Holloway brought with her from Rosemont, Virginia, to Louisville, Kentucky. *Courtesy Kentucky History Museum Collection, Kentucky Historical Society.*

As migrants surged into Kentucky, they brought consumer goods not only for their own use, but also to sell in exchange for land, livestock, and the necessities of setting up a farm. The French trader Barthélemi Tardiveau imported a large quantity of dry goods to exchange for "horned cattle, good horses, some stills between 60 and 80 gallons, or black male servants between 15 and 25 years of age." Charles Vancouver carried along a considerable quantity of valuable ironmongery, buckles, buttons, dry goods, and tablewares that he wished to sell for two or three yoke of oxen, "young healthy Negroes," and a quantity of whiskey. When Needham Parry, a Quaker from York County, Pennsylvania, visited Kentucky in 1794, he brought saddles to pay for his trip. Disposing of his goods on court day in Lexington, Parry termed the town "the greatest place for dealing I ever saw."[13]

Evidence from early probate inventories confirms that, while amenities generally were sparse, some Kentucky settlers owned consumer goods not usually associated with life in small fortified settlements. (See table 1.) Pewter tablewares (imported in large quantities from England) were very much in evidence for middling and

transportation—and abandonment—of women's domestic goods farther west, see John Mack Faragher, *Women and Men on the Overland Trail* (New Haven, 1979), 168–71.

[13] *Kentucky Gazette,* Dec. 15, 1787, March 15, 1790; "The Journal of Needham Parry, 1794," *Register of the Kentucky Historical Society,* 34 (Oct. 1936), 382.

Table 1
Ownership of Selected Consumer and Capital Property, Jefferson County, Kentucky, 1781–1783

Inventoried Goods and Chattels	*Percentage of Decedents (by Estate Value) Owning Selected Goods and Chattels*[a]			
	Bottom Third	*Middle Third*	*Upper Third*	*Total (N = 28)*
Food preparation and service utensils				
Pot	33	100	78	71
Other[b]	11	50	89	50
Spice equipment	11	0	22	11
Woodenware	11	20	22	18
Pewterware	33	80	100	71
Earthenware	0	40	22	21
Delft	0	0	22	7
Spoons	22	70	33	43
Knives/forks	11	30	11	18
Silver plate	0	0	11	4
Glassware	0	20	11	11
Tea equipment	0	10	67	25
Table linen	0	10	22	11
Furnishings				
Chair	0	40	33	25
Table	0	40	33	25
Looking glass	0	10	22	11
Lighting device	0	10	44	18
Mattress	22	80	55	54
Bedstead	0	10	33	14
Bed linen	66	80	66	71
Leisure goods				
Book	22	40	44	36
Musical instrument	0	0	11	4
Slaves	0	30	33	21
Tools and equipment				
Farming	11	90	100	68
Hunting/fishing	33	80	89	68
Woodworking	22	90	89	68
Textilemaking	11	60	67	46
Riding	11	60	44	39

Continued on next page

Table 1—*Continued*

Inventoried Goods and Chattels	*Percentage of Decedents (by Estate Value) Owning Selected Goods and Chattels*[a]			
	Bottom Third	*Middle Third*	*Upper Third*	*Total (N = 28)*
Livestock				
Pig	0	10	67	25
Cow	22	80	100	68
Horse	11	70	89	57
Sheep	11	20	11	14
Poultry	0	10	0	4

SOURCE: Minute Book A, 1780–1783, Jefferson County Court, Public Records Division (Kentucky Department for Libraries and Archives, Frankfort).

NOTES: Table 1 uses a method of scoring categories of personal property pioneered by Lois Green Carr and Lorena S. Walsh; so that our data might be compared, I have used many of their categories. See Lois Green Carr and Lorena S. Walsh, "The Standard of Living in the Colonial Chesapeake," *William and Mary Quarterly,* 45 (Jan. 1988), 135–59. Conclusions should be drawn from table 1 with care, given the small number of cases (28). Unfortunately, Inventory and Settlements Book 1, 1783–1800, of the Jefferson County Court is missing, and a courthouse fire apparently claimed all Fayette County probate inventories made before February 1803.

[a] Decedents are divided into three groups based on the values of their inventoried estates. Bottom Third (N = 9) consists of those with personal property valued at £2.19.9–28.11.6. Middle Third (N = 10) consists of those with personal property of £29.5.0–79.3.6. Upper Third (N = 9) consists of those with personal property of £80.7.6–396.17.4. Estate values have not been standardized over time by a commodity price index.

[b] A means of cooking other than a pot, such as a Dutch oven, griddle, or frying pan.

upper wealth groups; tea equipment appeared in three-fifths of the estates of the wealthiest one-third of decedents. But clearly capital goods—livestock, firearms, agricultural tools and equipment—played a more prominent role than consumer articles in the estates of aspiring planters; hoes and cows appeared more frequently than the genteel trappings of bed and board.

The poor were truly destitute, however, lacking by and large both consumer and capital goods, often owning little more than the clothing on their backs. Leonard Helm's estate, for example, consisted entirely of two coats, one waistcoat, one hat, one pair of shoes, and a blanket, totaling less than six pounds. At New Holland Station, Hugh McCloughin's personal effects included clothing, a gray horse, a buckskin, and ten bushels of salt. Abraham Keller, a military man and the wealthiest of this group, left behind his rifle, a sword, a regimental coat and trappings, a cooking pot, and a few pewter eating utensils. Gambling that a move west would improve their personal fortunes, these propertyless men risked and lost their lives in the turbulent days of early settlement.[14]

[14] On economic opportunities and the decision for military service among young men in New England, see Fred Anderson, *A People's Army: Massachusetts Soldiers and Society in the Seven Years' War* (New York, 1984), 26–39.

Pewter plate of the type found in the estates of middle- and upper-class Kentuckians. This one is inscribed "E.E.H.W. der Schneider, 1785." *Courtesy Kentucky History Museum Collection, Kentucky Historical Society.*

The close of the revolutionary war and a decline in British-sponsored Indian hostilities encouraged merchants and more substantial settlers to take a chance on the West. In 1783, just eight years after the first log fort was built in Kentucky, and one year after a bloody battle with the Indians at Blue Licks, Daniel Brodhead opened a retail store in Louisville. He transported his merchandise from Philadelphia to Pittsburgh by wagon, and then to Louisville in flatboats. The following year a total of at least six stores opened in Lexington and Danville, and by statehood in 1792, twenty retail stores operated in Lexington alone.[15]

Although an influx of migrants gave parts of Kentucky a settled character in the 1790s, rough frontier conditions prevailed. Indians continued to attack settlers and merchants floating cargoes down the Ohio until after the Battle of Fallen Timbers in 1794; small bands of warriers reportedly waylaid travelers within the state for several years thereafter. Louisville's reputation as the "Graveyard of the West" plagued the river community until residents drained mosquito-breeding ponds and marshlands in the 1810s. Housing throughout the state improved only slowly, with log construction remaining the norm until the end of the century. In 1792 Lexington could still be described as "principally a log village."[16]

Crude log stores characterized backcountry commerce. One typical rural estab-

[15] Lewis Collins, *History of Kentucky* (1847; reprint, Lexington, Ky., 1968), 362; Charles R. Staples, *History of Pioneer Lexington* (Lexington, Ky., 1939), 77.

[16] George H. Yater, *Two Hundred Years at the Falls of the Ohio: A History of Louisville and Jefferson County* (Louisville, 1979), 24; Staples, *History of Pioneer Lexington*, 80.

lishment consisted of "a large good log warehouse well calculated for salting provisions, and for storage of any kind" and a well-finished store, "completely fit to receive dry goods, being lined all round with good plank grooved and tongued and well floored and lofted." The country storekeeper resided in "a commodious dwelling cabbin sixteen feet square." In town the merchant often lived in his store. One such story-and-a-half log house in Louisville measured twenty-four by sixteen feet and boasted "a compleat store for goods at one end and a counting room or bed-chamber at the other."[17] The mid-1790s saw a general rebuilding in Lexington and Louisville; merchants gradually replaced log stores with ones of frame and brick.

On the Kentucky frontier, consumer life served as a common, unifying force. Shopping in a general store brought a wide cross section of the population together in social and commercial exchange. Names of some of these consumers appear in the five surviving ledgers in which James McDonald and Charles Thruston recorded transactions at their store in Louisville for nine months in 1794 and 1795 and in the daybook in which John and Abijah Hunt listed transactions at their store in Lexington for four months in 1796. In the records of McDonald and Thruston's store, 66 customers appear; in the records of the Hunts', 148. The conclusions drawn here rest on a sample of 40 customers in each store, who carried on a total of 1,714 transactions (purchases or payments)—1,173 transactions with McDonald and Thruston, 541 with Hunt.[18] These records reveal that customers included women and men, blacks and whites, the propertyless and large landholders. Townsmen as well as farmers from the surrounding countryside visited the stores, with rural customers making on the average fewer transactions.[19] Although Indians were not listed

[17] *Kentucky Gazette,* April 19, 1790.

[18] The following analysis of consumer behavior is based on a sample of 80 customers appearing either in John W. Hunt Daybook, July–Sept. 1796, microfilm (Division of Special Collections and Archives, Margaret I. King Library, University of Kentucky, Lexington) or in James McDonald and Charles Thruston Account Books, 1794–1797 (Manuscript Department, Filson Club, Louisville, Ky.). The purchases of the first 50 customers listed in the Hunt daybook were tracked from July through September 1796. Entries include the date, account holder, whether the transaction was a purchase or a payment, the goods exchanged, and the price. Almost half of the entries list the purchaser as well as the account holder. Transactions by 50 customers, also selected in order of appearance, recorded in the first McDonald and Thruston ledger were tracked from December 1794 through August 1795. These accounts listed dates, purchases, payments, and prices. To learn the economic standing of the customers sampled, their names were cross-referenced with the Jefferson County Tax List, 1795, microfilm (Kentucky Historical Society, Frankfort) and the Fayette County Tax List, 1796, *ibid.* In addition to nontithables, who included 1 male slave and 5 free women without taxable property, 74 of the customers appeared in the tax records, leaving a total sample of 80 customers. Occupation and other biographical information for 21 of the customers was found in the *Kentucky Gazette* and the files of the Kentucky Historical Society. A history of the Hunt store appears in James A. Ramage, "The Hunts and the Morgans: A Study of a Prominent Kentucky Family" (Ph.D. diss., University of Kentucky, 1972), 22–61.

[19] While slightly over half (45) of the store customers sampled owned land, fewer than a half of those (19) held town lots. The number of landless and nontithables was 34. A third (6) of the town lot owners and a fourth (6) of the rural landowners were "frequent" shoppers, making eleven or more transactions at the stores. It is estimated that in 1800, 49.2% of Kentucky householders owned land; see Joan Wells Coward, *Kentucky in the New Republic: The Process of Constitution Making* (Lexington, Ky., 1979), 55. For slightly lower estimates of landholding based on different sampling techniques, see Lee Soltow, "Kentucky Wealth at the End of the Eighteenth Century," *Journal of Economic History,* 43 (Sept. 1983), 617–33; and Fredrika Johanna Teute, "Land, Liberty, and Labor in the Post-Revolutionary Era: Kentucky as the Promised Land" (Ph.D. diss., Johns Hopkins University, 1988), 254–311.

Table 2
Gender of Customers at the Hunt Store, Fayette County, 1796

Customer's Relationship to Holder of Store Account	*Percentage of Total Visits to Store*		
	Men (*N* = 258)	*Women* (*N* = 48)	*Overall* (*N* = 306)
Same person	45	2	47
Kindred[a]	11	11	22
Others by name	10	1	11
Slaves[b]	19	1	20
Total	85	15	100

SOURCE: John W. Hunt Daybook, July–Sept. 1796, microfilm (Division of Special Collections and Archives, Margaret I. King Library, University of Kentucky, Lexington).
NOTES: Each trip by each customer is counted except for purchases made by "order" and trips where only the account holder, but not the person who picked up the goods, was mentioned.
[a] Male kindred include 9% sons for fathers, 2% brothers for brothers, and less than 1% sons for mothers; female kindred include 9% wives for husbands and 2% daughters for fathers.
[b] Slaves include those identified as "Black man," "negro woman," "black boy," "girl," "man," or "boy." The latter three, more ambiguous, terms were identified as servile equivalents since they appeared in accounts that also listed purchases by kin. For example, David Mead's "son" *and* "boy" visited the store together on September 20, 1796.

among those patronizing the two stores, Elijah Craig's purchase during the summer of 1796 of 172 "strans of bead" (along with dozens of Jew's harps, needles, pins, combs, and over twenty yards of ribbon) suggests that he was involved in supplying the Indian trade farther west.[20]

Men were the most frequent store customers, although women also shopped, maintaining their own accounts or charging goods to their husbands or fathers. What might be termed independent women held five of the eighty accounts sampled from the ledgers. Like the "Widow [Elizabeth] Gillmore" or Rebecca Green (whose pending divorce was reported in the *Kentucky Gazette*), they were most likely single, widowed, or divorced. Economically dependent women also visited the store. Six of the Hunt accounts sampled—which often listed the purchaser as well as the account charged—recorded periodic transactions by wives; daughters also charged goods to their fathers' accounts. Although a recent study has suggested that women in the Chesapeake in the 1760s seldom entered their neighborhood store, it appears that their counterparts in Kentucky seized the opportunity to shop slightly more often. (See table 2.) In those accounts listing a purchaser, one of every seven customers was a woman; one of every eleven was a wife charging goods to her husband's account.[21]

[20] Manufactured beads played a large role in trade between settlers and Indians from the first years of colonization. See Ivor Noel Hume, *A Guide to the Artifacts of Colonial America* (New York, 1982), 53–55.
[21] This calculation is based upon 306 transactions in the Hunt daybook (about half the total) that identify the purchaser as well as the account charged. Such identifications include, for example, "self," "wife," "daughter," and

At the end of the eighteenth century, shopping represented a limited area of authority for a married woman, providing an opportunity to venture outside her own home and transact business on an equal basis with men. And in at least a few backcountry families, shopping was becoming a woman's job: wives did all or the majority of the purchasing in three of the families sampled. John Fowler's wife, for example, made an almost weekly trip to the Hunts' store. More than just a "deputy husband"—a substitute for a spouse who normally was in charge of the family's external affairs—Fowler was a regular customer and doubtless commanded the interest and attention of the storekeeper in her own right as she chose over six pounds worth of household goods.[22]

Many men, however, retained control of their family's economic relations. Henry Brock did all the shopping in the Hunt store for his household, even purchasing the cloth and haberdashery items that female members needed for the construction of their clothing. Brock may have had the assistance of his wife on these occasions, but the merchant left no record of her presence. Because the records do not mention anyone accompanying purchasers, the account books reveal little difference in the buying behavior of most male and female consumers. One distinction, however, does appear—in the purchase of whiskey. During much of the summer of 1796, two Hunt customers, the cabinetmaker Daniel Weible and the hatter Nathanial Lowery, each purchased a quart of whiskey nearly every day, suggesting that some men carried on the artisanal tradition of drinking throughout the workday. Weible and Lowery distributed their whiskey purchases unevenly throughout the week, buying more often on Friday, Saturday, and Wednesday than on Monday and Thursday. Tuesday seems to have been a more serious workday, and Sunday a day of rest (or recovery).[23]

African Americans also made purchases at the store. Jack, one of five slaves belonging to Rebecca Hite, held one of the forty accounts sampled from the McDonald and Thruston account book. At least two other blacks, identified as John Thruston's Bob and Black Billy, had accounts as well. Billy bought five and one-half yards of calico and made a partial payment in cash, continuing to owe one pound and nine pence.[24] Bob made two small cash payments for unspecified merchandise he had purchased two months previously. Jack was the most regular slave customer,

"boy." Conclusions drawn from this data are admittedly speculative, as transactions not listing a purchaser were probably made by the account holder—in most cases a male. In a similar fashion, Allan Kulikoff calculates that 1 of every 13 customers at the Simpson-Baird store in Prince George's County, Maryland, in 1769 was a woman; only 1 in 33 was a wife charging to her husband's account. Kulikoff, *Tobacco and Slaves,* 225–26.

[22] William R. Leach estimates that by World War I women were doing between 80 and 85% of the consumer purchasing in the United States. He discusses shopping as an index of female economic power in Leach, "Transformations in a Culture of Consumption," 333. On the "deputy husband," see Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, *Good Wives: Image and Reality in the Lives of Women in Northern New England, 1650–1750* (New York, 1980), 9.

[23] The artisans distributed their 54 whiskey purchases on Friday (24%), Saturday (19%), Wednesday (19%), Monday (15%), Thursday (13%), Tuesday (7%), and Sunday (4%). On irregular artisan work rhythms associated with drinking, see E. P. Thompson, "Time, Work-Discipline, and Industrial Capitalism," *Past and Present,* 38 (Dec. 1967), 56–97; and W. J. Rorabaugh, *The Alcoholic Republic: An American Tradition* (New York, 1979).

[24] Virginia currency, reckoned in English pounds, shillings, and pence, remained the standard in Kentucky until the end of the century. At the time in Kentucky, 6 shillings equaled 1 dollar and 20 shillings equaled 1 pound. Each shilling was worth 12 pence.

visiting the store at least seven times in 1795. His purchases included bohea tea, a hat, shoes, buckles, velvet, and thread. Jack paid his account regularly, bringing in small sums of cash, raccoon skins, and other merchandise. On the seventeenth of April, for example, he traded seven raccoon skins and other unspecified goods for a hat, a half pound of tea, and a pair of shoes that cost nine shillings. In July Jack returned to pay six shillings and sell two pairs of shoes, each worth nine shillings. (Perhaps during the interim he had taught himself to make shoes.) By August of 1795, the slave had made purchases totaling two pounds, fourteen shillings, and eight pence, an expenditure comparable to that of many white consumers. Jack paid the merchants two pounds and six shillings, leaving on the books a debt of eight shillings and eight pence.

The appearance of Jack, Billy, and Bob in the merchant ledgers illustrates that commercial activities on the frontier could bind blacks and whites in relationships of trust. It is significant that slaves not only shopped in a backcountry store but also purchased their goods on credit as did free consumers. Book credit was an important commercial lubricant in the cash-short West, and merchants granted it freely to "men of ability and punctuality." Jack's regular payments and entrepreneurial enterprise indicate that he made a good credit risk.

The back settlements offered few commercial opportunities to the ambitious black pioneer. A slave might (with permission) hire himself out for wages, spend his free time gathering ginseng in the woods, or, like Jack, trap and prepare animal skins. In turn, store owners such as John Rhea advertised that they would take "gintang, furrs, viz. Beavers, Racoons, Foxes, wild cats, and otter skins" in payment for goods. Although Kentucky's slave code (adopted from Virginia's) specified stiff penalties for trading without a master's permission, the practical necessities of frontier life may have favored economic freedoms not necessarily found in more mature slave societies. In one exceptional case, a Pulaski County slave in south central Kentucky opened a saltpeter manufactory during the War of 1812 and purchased his and his wife's freedom with the profits. Few slave entrepreneurs, however, could hope to be so fortunate; most probably had to content themselves with trading in a few small amenities like tea and printed cloth.[25]

A backwoods slave's purchase of bohea tea on credit suggests the degree to which all social groups participated in Kentucky's consumer economy. Although tax records yield only a rough approximation of personal worth, it appears that financial status made less difference than might be expected in consumer behavior. (See table 3.) A wide range of store customers purchased such items as cloth and haberdashery; even those with little or no taxable wealth purchased small amenities like tea and sugar. Christian Willman, a tenant without taxable property, made five trips to the Hunt store from July through September. His purchases included seven yards of

[25] *Kentucky Gazette,* Jan. 10, 1789; Juliet E. K. Walker, *Free Frank: A Black Pioneer on the Antebellum Frontier* (Lexington, Ky., 1983), 1–48. On commercial activities among South Carolina slaves, see Peter H. Wood, *Black Majority: Negroes in Colonial South Carolina from 1670 through the Stono Rebellion* (New York, 1974), 195–217. See also Unser, "Frontier Exchange Economy," 184–88. For a somewhat dated account of the slave experience in pioneer Kentucky, see J. Winston Coleman, *Slavery Times in Kentucky* (Chapel Hill, 1940), 3–17.

Table 3
Purchases by Customers at Two Kentucky Stores, 1794–1796

	Percentage of Customers (by Taxable Wealth) Purchasing Selected Goods				
Goods	*Nontithable*	*Bottom Third*	*Middle Third*	*Upper Third*	*Total (N = 80)*
Cloth	83	80	72	71	75
Clothing	60	52	52	29	45
Haberdashery	80	56	68	42	56
Dishes	0	28	40	38	33
Cutlery	0	16	4	8	9
Glassware	0	24	32	8	20
Tea	40	36	44	21	34
Coffee	20	12	24	21	19
Sugar	0	48	32	33	35
Spices	0	12	24	8	14
Whiskey	0	36	0	8	14
Spirits	0	4	0	8	4
Books	0	4	4	4	3
Writing paper	0	32	12	25	21
Chamber pot	0	4	8	8	6

SOURCES: James McDonald and Charles Thruston Account Books, 1794–1797 (Manuscript Department, Filson Club, Louisville, Ky.); John W. Hunt Daybook, July–Sept. 1796, microfilm (Division of Special Collections and Archives, Margaret I. King Library, University of Kentucky, Lexington). NOTES: For sampling method, see note 18. Nontithables include one male slave and five free women without taxable property. The remaining male customers are divided into three groups. Bottom Third (N = 25) consists of those paying a tax of £0.0.0–0.3.6. Middle Third (N = 25) consists of those paying a tax of £0.3.7–2.6.10. Upper Third (N = 24) consists of those paying a tax of £2.10.0–36.2.1.

muslin, a quarter pound of hyson tea, three pounds of sugar, and a set of cups and saucers: an expenditure of one pound, six shillings, and nine pence. Over a period of six months, John Davis spent almost four pounds at the McDonald and Thruston store to purchase such common necessities as coarse thread, linen, needles, scissors, and a hat, as well as the amenities of a pound of coffee, three yards of printed calico, four yards of moreen (a cloth used for curtains), a skein of silk thread, writing paper, a spelling book, and a pair of spectacles. Without taxable property, but with access to Kentucky's abundant woodlands, Davis paid his account with eleven loads of wood, two planks, one pole, and a small amount of cash.[26]

Wealthier consumers actually made fewer purchases in some categories, suggesting that they spread their shopping over several stores, bought directly from the

[26] In 1795 and 1796 Kentucky taxed the following property: first-, second-, and third-class land, town lots, carriages, slaves, horses, cattle, billiard tables, ordinary licenses, retail stores, and stud horses. Tax lists enumerate items taxed. See Jefferson County Tax List, 1795; and Fayette County Tax List, 1796. See William J. Gilmore, *Reading Becomes a Necessity of Life: Material and Cultural Life in Rural New England, 1780–1835* (Knoxville, 1989).

East, or perhaps forswore consumer amenities in favor of capital improvements, as one scholar has argued was the case for planters in western Virginia. Evidence from Kentucky estates probated in the early years of the the nineteenth century favors the first two explanations; although planters continued to invest heavily in productive assets (especially slaves), they still managed to acquire an expanding array of consumer amenities. (See table 4.) By comparing this data with estates inventoried twenty years earlier (table 1), we can see that ownership of ceramic tablewares, knives, forks, glassware, chairs, tables, and looking glasses expanded significantly for middling and upper wealth holders and came into the reach of many poorer settlers (along with tools and livestock) for the first time. It appears that a growing variety of domestic possessions transformed the material lives of many Kentuckians in the final decades of the eighteenth century.[27]

Even on the rude frontier of eighteenth-century Kentucky, a remarkably sophisticated, international pattern of consumption laid a cultural base for American life. Demand for manufactured goods fueled a lively trade. In 1802 François Michaux, estimating that "seven-tenths of the manufactured articles consumed in Kentucky . . . are imported from England," cited coarse and fine jewelry, cutlery, ironmongery, tinware, drapery, mercery, drugs, and fine earthenware. Muslins, nankeens, and tea were imported directly from India, he believed, and from "the Carribbees coffee, and various kinds of raw sugar."[28]

When it came to buying their manufactures, Kentuckians apparently forgot their hatred of the British for recently encouraging Indian attacks. British tablewares, including queensware, delft (a tin-enameled earthernware), pewter, cutlery, and glass figured prominently in newspaper advertisements. Robert Parker sold cream-colored and red-edged soup and shallow plates in 1788, and by 1797, William West advertised that he had lost "A CRATE OF QUEENS WARE, containing blue edged plates and dishes, coffee pots, tea pots, coffee cups and saucers, tea cups and saucers, bowls, & c," in assorted colors. The English potter Josiah Wedgwood had perfected queensware, a fine, cream-colored earthenware, in the 1760s, and it was subsequently imitated by most English potters and several on the Continent. From 1770 to 1830 it was the staple earthenware in England and America. Delft had been produced in England as early as the late sixteenth century; for it still to be sold in Kentucky in the last decade of the eighteenth century suggests that British merchants dumped their unfashionable wares on the American country market. Likewise, the pewter trade remained brisk in backcountry districts, although it had declined precipitously in the larger cities after the revolutionary war.[29]

[27] Richard R. Beeman, *The Evolution of the Southern Backcountry: A Case Study of Lunenburg County, Virginia, 1746–1832* (Philadelphia, 1984), 75–80. Because tables 1 and 4 do not use constant dollars, readers should not infer from them any conclusions about the relative wealth of decedents in the two periods.

[28] Michaux, *Travels to the West of the Alleghany Mountains,* 203. On the transformation of sugar from a rare luxury to a necessity of life, see Sidney W. Mintz, *Sweetness and Power: The Place of Sugar in Modern History* (New York, 1985).

[29] *Kentucky Gazette,* May 17, 1788, March 15, 1797; Elizabeth Stillinger, *The Antiques Guide to Decorative Arts in America, 1600–1875* (New York, 1973), 184–260.

Table 4
Ownership of Selected Consumer and Capital Property in Two Kentucky Counties, 1801–1804

Inventoried Goods and Chattels	*Percentage of Decedents (by Estate Value) Owning Selected Goods and Chattels*[a]			
	Bottom Third	*Middle Third*	*Upper Third*	*Total (N = 46)*
Food preparation and service utensils				
Pot	53	73	81	70
Other[b]	47	67	69	61
Spice equipment	7	20	19	15
Woodenware	13	7	31	17
Pewterware	33	80	75	63
Earthenware	27	67	62	52
Fancy ware[c]	7	13	13	11
Spoons	33	13	38	28
Knives/forks	20	53	56	43
Silver plate	0	13	19	17
Glassware	27	67	62	52
Tea/coffee equipment	20	60	75	52
Table linen	7	20	13	13
Furnishings				
Chair	27	73	88	63
Table	33	60	88	61
Looking glass	40	67	50	52
Lighting device	13	47	69	43
Mattress	60	87	94	80
Bedstead	47	53	75	59
Bed linen	66	80	66	71
Leisure goods				
Book	22	40	44	36
Musical instrument	0	0	13	4
Slaves	20	67	88	59
Tools and equipment				
Farming	60	67	88	72
Hunting/fishing	20	47	56	41
Woodworking	67	73	81	74
Textilemaking	40	73	81	65
Riding	67	80	75	74

Continued on next page

Table 4—*Continued*

Inventoried Goods and Chattels	*Percentage of Decedents (by Estate Value) Owning Selected Goods and Chattels*[a]			
	Bottom Third	*Middle Third*	*Upper Third*	*Total (N = 46)*
Livestock				
Pig	47	60	81	63
Cow	47	60	81	63
Horse	67	87	100	85
Sheep	20	40	75	46
Poultry	7	13	13	11

SOURCES: Inventory and Settlements Book 2, 1800–1812, Jefferson County Court, Public Records Division (Kentucky Department for Libraries and Archives, Frankfort); Will Book A, [1803]–1809, Fayette County, *ibid.*

[a] Decedents are divided into three groups based on the values of their inventoried estates. Bottom Third (N = 15) consists of those with personal property valued at £8.0.9–155.0.6. Middle Third (N = 15) consists of those with personal property of £160.4.7–544.9.0. Upper Third (N = 16) consists of those with personal property £618.7.9–1,948.15.0. Estate values have not been standardized over time by a commodity price index.

[b] A means of cooking other than a pot, such as a Dutch oven, griddle, or frying pan.

[c] Wares identified specifically as delft, "china," or queensware. The general category "earthenware" no doubt includes other fine (but unspecified) wares listed only as, for example, "tea cups and saucers."

British imports enabled backcountry consumers rapidly to replace homemade communal trenchers with more attractive individualized wares. The dramatic increase in the use of English ceramics after 1760 reflected not only increased availability but also a new relationship between the individual and material culture: bodily privacy became more important as each person ate from his or her own plate rather than a shared dish. Settlers pushing west carried along these new genteel attitudes; pioneering farmers such as Thomas Ammon apparently grew a few extra bushels of corn in order to buy sets of cups and saucers.[30]

Although historians have commonly assumed that frontier women spun and wove all the garments for their households, in fact British textiles vied with homespun from the earliest days of settlement.[31] Visitors to Kentucky remarked that "here as elsewhere they have the mania for buying imported cloth." Richard Henderson sold osnaburgs at Boonesborough in 1775; by 1784 James Wilkinson vended cor-

[30] James Deetz, *In Small Things Forgotten: The Archaeology of Early American Life* (Garden City, 1977), 46–61. On the spread of genteel tastes from England to the Chesapeake, see Lois Green Carr and Lorena S. Walsh, "The Standard of Living in the Colonial Chesapeake," *William and Mary Quarterly,* 45 (Jan. 1988), 137. On the spread of genteel tastes to ordinary New England farm folk, see Gloria L. Main, "The Standard of Living in Southern New England, 1640–1773," *William and Mary Quarterly,* 45 (Jan. 1988), 129.

[31] See, for example, Rev. Dr. Joseph Doddridge, *Notes on the Settlement and Indian Wars of the Western Parts of Virginia and Pennsylvania, from the Year 1763 until the Year 1783 Inclusive* (Wellsburgh, Va., 1824), 140–47. For a critique of recent scholarship for attributing the major responsibility for textile production in the prefactory era to females, see Adrienne Dora Hood, "Organization and Extent of Textile Manufacture in Eighteenth-Century, Rural Pennsylvania: A Case Study of Chester County" (Ph.D. diss., University of California, San Diego, 1988), 5–6.

duroy, chintz, calico, dimity, and Marseilles—the last used for fine quilted petticoats or coverlets. Michaux observed that many of the settlers cultivated flax and that women manufactured linen, but he reported they preferred to exchange their country cloth "for articles imported from Europe." The Frenchman admired the quality of the indigenous linens but related that "none but the inferior inhabitants use them, the others giving a preference to Irish linens, which comprise a considerable share of their commerce."[32]

Seventy-five percent (that is, sixty) of the Hunt and the McDonald and Thruston customers purchased textiles. The forty-two types of cloth they bought ranged from the durable to the ornamental. Pioneers acquired drab and forest cloth, durant, shalloon, and coating for men's suits and outerwear, and corduroy, silk fustian, and velvet for waistcoats. Women's gowns were fashioned from assorted silks, chintz, sprigged muslin, and cotton calico. Undergarments for both sexes were cut out of a wide price range of linens, and delicate cambrics were used for collars, ruffles, and fichus. Buckram, tapes, buttons, and pins provided the structural underpinnings for these eighteenth-century garments; at the two stores, frontier women and men completed their outfits with imported gloves, mitts, stockings, hats, and handkerchiefs. Stylish clothing was not the prerogative of a tiny elite: when Lexington resident Nancy Murphy died in 1803, her modest estate included a flowered muslin outfit, an old "half silk" gown, two calico dresses, two petticoats, a hat, an apron, gloves, ribbon, silver buttons, and a neck ruffle.[33]

Advertisements in the *Kentucky Gazette,* the first paper in Kentucky, suggest that backcountry entrepreneurs emphasized consumer choice and metropolitan style to increase their trade. John Bradford began publication of this newspaper in Lexington on August 11, 1787, and as the only paper within five hundred miles—postriders employed by Bradford carried it to the outside, or frontier, settlements—it occupied a position of unusual interest. In the pages of Bradford's paper merchants offered "the necessary, durable, useful, and ornamental . . . in patterns, pieces, or parcels as may suit the purchasers." In 1788, for example, Alexander and James Parker listed over two hundred separate items for sale, including forty-five types of cloth, thirty-nine haberdashery items, twenty-three different tablewares, and a miscellaneous assortment of shoes, snuff, hardware, writing paper, playing cards, and spices.[34]

[32] Howard C. Rice, *Barthélemi Tardiveau: A French Trader in the West* (Baltimore, 1938), 32; John D. Shane, "The Henderson Company Ledger," *Filson Club History Quarterly,* 21 (Jan. 1947), 22–48; "Letters of General James Wilkinson," 261; Michaux, *Travels to the West of the Alleghany Mountains,* 241.

[33] Inventories were usually more detailed in describing the dress of poor decedents, whose clothing made up a larger proportion of their estates. With a probated inventory of £30.18.9, Nancy Murphy fell in the lowest wealth rank of decedents listed in table 4. For her inventory, see Will Book A, [1803]–1809, p. 108, Fayette County, Public Records Division (Kentucky Department for Libraries and Archives, Frankfort). For a useful description of eighteenth-century textiles, see Florence M. Montgomery, *Textiles in America, 1650–1870* (New York, 1984).

[34] William Henry Perrin, *The Pioneer Press of Kentucky* (Louisville, 1888), 13; *Kentucky Gazette,* Aug. 2, June 7, 1788.

Shopping offered settlers on the frontier an exciting glimpse of the outside world. Circling the customer on plank shelves, consumer goods from around the world titillated the senses and fired the imagination. Ceramic tablewares from England, flowered chintzes from India, and coffee from the "Caribbees" suggested far-off places and promised to relieve the drab interiors of log homes. Stores were a community resource and shopping provided valuable entertainment; like the county courthouse or the outdoor revival, the crossroads store furnished a meeting place for neighborly visits among widely scattered residents. Merchants advertised the arrival of a new shipment of goods, and women and men from the surrounding countryside traveled to watch the unpacking. In severe winters, when the Ohio River froze, the newspaper reported the breakup of ice upstream that would allow the long-awaited spring importation to arrive.[35]

Shopping may have been exciting, but it was also expensive. In the face of high prices and a shortage of specie, merchants and consumers struggled to maintain commercial and material ties with the East. Visitors to Kentucky were often scandalized at the prices paid for imported goods, reporting that "the Poor Natives are Obliged to pay upon an average 100 P Cent, upon the Philadelphia and Baltimore Prices." One traveler, commenting on the perpetual shortage of money, observed that "what cash there is, soon becomes collected in the shops and returns for goods; imports selling from one to two hundred percent more than the Philadelphia price." And prices in Philadelphia, of course, were much higher than those in London.[36]

Kentucky merchants defended their charges as reasonable and low, however, claiming that they merely reflected the cost of transportation and a modest profit. Shopkeeper William Leavy recalled that the difference in Pennsylvania and Virginia currency was a very convenient way to calculate the merchant's return. "Goods were always bought in Philadelphia, where the dollar is seven shillings and six pence,—here in Kentucky and Virginia are but six shillings to the Dollar." The difference of currency and the addition of carriage determined the usual wholesale terms of selling goods in Lexington for many years. A comparison of Philadelphia and Kentucky costs for 1786–1792 reveals that Philadelphia items cost about 50 percent more in Kentucky, while indigenous products like corn and pork sold more cheaply in the West.[37]

The price of frontier consumption becomes more meaningful when compared to income. (See table 5.) The *Kentucky Gazette* reported that a common laborer

[35] *Kentucky Gazette,* May 17, March 1, 1788. See also Lewis E. Atherton, *The Frontier Merchant in Mid-America* (Columbia, Mo., 1971), 51–58. The social importance of the frontier store was comparable to that of the rituals surrounding court day in eighteenth-century Virginia. See Rhys Isaac, *The Transformation of Virginia, 1740–1790* (Chapel Hill, 1982), 88–94.

[36] Thomas Chapman, "Journal of a journey through the United States, 1795–96. . . . " in *Travels in the Old South: Selected from Periodicals of the Times,* ed. Eugene L. Schwaab (2 vols., Lexington, Ky., 1973), I, 31; "Some particulars relative to the Soil, Situation, Productions, &c. of Kentucky," *ibid.*, 60.

[37] William A. Leavy, "A Memoir of Lexington and Its Vicinity: With Some Notice of Many Prominent Citizens and Its Institutions of Education and Religion," *Register of the Kentucky Historical Society,* 41 (Oct. 1943), 342; Hazel Dicken Garcia, "'A Great Deal of Money . . .': Notes on Kentucky Costs, 1786–1792," *ibid.*, 77 (Summer 1979), 186–200.

Table 5

Cost of Selected Consumer Goods and Country Produce, Kentucky, 1794–1796

Item	*Quantity*	*Cost in Shillings*
Goods imported into Kentucky		
Chamber pot	1	4.6
Cloth		
Calico	1 yard	5.0–30.4
Cashmere	1 yard	20.0
Linen	1 yard	3.0–12.0
Moreen	1 yard	3.6–4.6
Muslin	1 yard	2.0–4.0
Sprigged muslin	1 yard	15.0
Coffee	1 pound	2.6
Cups and saucers	1 dozen	10.0
Decanter	1	2.3
Glasses	1	1.0
Hat	1	24.0
Knives and forks	pair	3.0
Paper	1 quire	1.6
Pepper	¼ pound	1.6
Pins	1 paper	2.0
Plates, large	1 dozen	14.0
Stockings	1 pair	8.0
Sugar, loaf	1 pound	4.0
Tablespoon	1	.6
Tea, bohea	1 pound	5.0
Tea, hyson	1 pound	15.0
Thread	1 skein	.2
Wine	1 quart	6.0
Country produce		
Bacon	1 pound	.6
Butter	1 pound	1.0
Cheese	1 pound	.10
Corn	1 bushel	4.0
Country linen	1 yard	1.6–2.9
Country sugar	1 pound	1.6
Eggs	1 dozen	.6
Feathers	1 pound	3.0
Lard	1 pound	.6
Oats	1 bushel	1.6
Peach brandy	1 pint	1.2
Raccoon skin	1	1.3
Salt	1 bushel	20.0
Tobacco	1 roll	.6
Whiskey	1 quart	1.6

SOURCES: James McDonald and Charles Thruston Account Books, 1794–1797 (Manuscript Department, Filson Club, Louisville, Ky.); John W. Hunt Daybook, July–Sept. 1796, microfilm (Division of Special Collections and Archives, Margaret I. King Library, University of Kentucky, Lexington).

Table 6
Cash Value of Consumer Purchases at the McDonald and Thruston Store, Jefferson County, for a Nine-Month Period, 1794–1795

	Percentage of Customers (by Taxable Wealth)				
Total Purchases in Pounds Sterling	*Nontithable* (*N* = 2)	*Bottom Third* (*N* = 12)	*Middle Third* (*N* = 12)	*Upper Third* (*N* = 14)	*Total* (*N* = 40)
Under 1 pound	0	8	8	0	5
1–5 pounds	100	33	33	36	36
6–10	0	17	17	14	15
11–15	0	8	8	14	10
16–25	0	8	8	7	8
26–50	0	25	8	14	15
Over 50 pounds	0	0	17	14	10

SOURCE: James McDonald and Charles Thruston Account Books, 1794–1797 (Manuscript Department, Filson Club, Louisville, Ky.).
NOTE: For sampling method, see note 18. Customers retain the wealth group status assigned in table 3.

earned ten dollars (about sixty shillings) per month in 1797. Using two shillings and six pence as the average daily wage, one can estimate that such a laborer worked one day for a pound of coffee, two days for a pound of tea, and nine and one-half days for a hat. A farmer, on the other hand, had to raise one and one-quarter bushels of corn to buy a pound of tea and two and one-half bushels to buy a set of cups and saucers. Harry Toulmin, who penned a description of Kentucky in 1793 for the prospective English emigrant, was optimistic that an industrious settler could produce eighty-eight bushels of corn to sell in his second year; if this was indeed the case, the farmer's family would have had approximately seventeen pounds to spend on capital and consumer purchases, as well as for rent payments if they numbered among the large tenant population. The customer accounts from the McDonald and Thruston ledger, which covers a period of nine months, suggest that many Kentuckians spent a sizable portion of their income on store goods. Half of the families spent between one and fifteen pounds at the store; a quarter made purchases over twenty-five pounds. (See table 6.)[38]

Like a cabin raising or a quilting bee, the obligations of credit and debt at the backcountry store helped create and cement relationships of trust and mutual de-

[38] *Kentucky Gazette,* Sept. 13, 1797. Buying power changed over time as price relationships changed. Hazel Dicken Garcia estimates that a common laborer earned twelve shillings *per day* in 1784 and speculates that wages dropped abruptly in the early 1790s. This is consistent with the rapidity of settlement: by the 1790s any initial shortage of laborers was probably overcome. See Garcia, "'A Great Deal of Money. . . .'" 197. Harry Toulmin's estimate may be overoptimistic. When the farmer John Hume died in Jefferson County in 1802 he had in the field 15 acres of corn valued at £18.15.0. For his inventory, see Inventory and Settlements Book 2, 1800–1812, p. 42, Jefferson County, Public Records Division. At a market price of 4 shillings a bushel, this amounted to less than 100 bushels of corn to meet family and livestock needs, much less produce a surplus for sale. Harry Toulmin, *A Description of Kentucky in North America: To Which Are Prefixed Miscellaneous Observations Respecting the United States,* ed. Thomas D. Clark (Lexington, Ky., 1945), 98–99.

pendence. A shortage of hard currency forced Kentucky merchants to be flexible in accepting payment for their goods. Book credit, or the carrying of an account without interest, tided over many consumers until the crop came in. In their newspaper advertisements merchants constantly reminded customers to come in and pay their outstanding bills; evidence suggests, however, that payment usually occurred only once or twice a year. Over a four-month period, only a third of the Hunt customers made payments on their accounts; but over a nine-month period, 90 percent of the McDonald and Thruston customers made payments. Merchants apparently welcomed payment in any kind of metal currency. In 1789 a Danville merchant reported the theft from his money box of "seventy pound Virginia currency, amongst which was five [Spanish] Doubloons, and two German Carolines." The merchant ledgers also reveal that installment buying is not an invention of the twentieth century. At the end of nine months, 78 percent of the McDonald and Thruston customers rolled their debt over into the next ledger.[39]

Shopkeepers advertised that in lieu of cash, they would accept country produce, hides, hemp, tobacco, wheat, military pay, land warrants, and even cattle and hogs on foot. A significant number of solicited products—firkins of good butter, cheese, eggs, and country-made linen—were those customarily produced by women. With a river system that flowed south and transmontane travel difficult and expensive, a triangular trade arose between Kentucky, New Orleans, and the East. Kentucky merchants imported goods on credit from firms in Philadelphia and Baltimore and received country produce in payment from their customers. Shipped down the river on flatboats, those agricultural products found a market in New Orleans where they were exchanged for Louisiana sugar, cotton, and indigo; these staples, in turn, sailed back east to cover the cost of the goods originally purchased. With western trade largely dependent on sensitive interregional and international linkages, navigation on the Mississippi River and the right to deposit cargoes at Spanish-held New Orleans remained the most explosive issue in the West (spawning a number of separatist schemes) until resolved by Jefferson's purchase of Louisiana in 1803.[40]

While the Louisville merchants James McDonald and Charles Thruston received half their payments in cash, during the summer of 1796 John Hunt in Lexington received 85 percent of his payments in country produce or merchandise and only 15 percent in cash. Thomas Ammon hauled in five bushels of corn, and Nicholas Lewis deposited forty-three pounds of bacon at the store. Elizabeth Gillmore paid in oats, butter, and homespun linen. The storekeeper meticulously recorded each transaction in his daybook, crediting Gillmore's account, for example, by twenty-seven shillings and nine pence for eighteen and one-half yards of country linen.

[39] *Kentucky Gazette,* April 4, 1789. Of the accounts 8% (3) balanced; 15% (6) showed a balance in the customer's favor. Half of the account holders (31) who owed money to the merchant recorded a debt of between 1 and 5 pounds.

[40] On the commercial network of John and Abijah Hunt, see Ramage, "Hunts and Morgans," 22–61. See also Richard C. Wade, *The Urban Frontier: Pioneer Life in Early Pittsburgh, Cincinnati, Lexington, Louisville, and St. Louis* (Chicago, 1964), 42. On western separatism, see Reginald Horsman, *The Frontier in the Formative Years, 1783–1815* (New York, 1970), 13–20; and Patricia Watlington, *The Partisan Spirit: Kentucky Politics, 1779–1792* (New York, 1972), 105–87.

While some historians consider payment in kind a direct exchange bypassing the cash nexus, in Kentucky at least the use of this type of payment seems more a result of the shortage of currency than evidence of a precapitalist *mentalité*.[41]

Although she manufactured cloth, the emblem of the self-sufficient household, the Widow Gillmore plainly did not intend to dress herself in homespun. Instead she sold her country produce for goods she wanted more: a hat, two skeins of silk thread, and several yards of imported fabric. In turn, the Hunts and other merchants accepted produce they knew they could sell in New Orleans. Making cloth at home did not preclude also buying it on the market: records indicate that in 1801, the Port of Louisville shipped out 2,588 yards of country linen produced by women like Gillmore who would rather wear "clouded nankeen" at three shillings a yard than their own homespun.[42]

In fact, despite widespread ownership of various articles of textile-making equipment (see table 4), few frontier women owned all the tools necessary to be completely self-sufficient in cloth. A typical example was Cloe, a free Negro woman in Lexington, who owned tools only for the middle steps of cloth production: a spinning wheel and a winding reel. Yet her estate also included numerous aprons, shawls, caps, petticoats, and gowns as well as two calico dresses and a muslin habit made from imported cloth—articles perhaps purchased by her spinning. Other women showed equal (if not always legal) enterprise in acquiring imported goods. Isaiah Yard, for example, purchased six and one-half yards of calico "to pay Mrs. Cape for boarding & nursin when I was sick." Patrick Scott recalled telling his brother that he had seen Mrs. William Logan "filch" goods in a local store. "He told me not to tell him any thing ab[ou]t it, as he wo'd be bound to report it."[43]

Not everyone acclaimed the affection of women for imported wares. Soon after the colonists defeated Great Britain, jeremiads warned that a new and more invidious threat faced the United States: Imported consumer goods created distinctions in dress and equipage that threatened to undermine the rough equality of condition essential to a republic. Warnings occasionally appeared in the *Kentucky Gazette* "on the fatal consequences of luxury." Such a letter addressed "To the Good Women of Kentucke" asked, "Shall we not be as comfortable and lovely clothed in homespun as in foreign lace and brocade?" One can almost hear a chorus of female consumers answering, "No!" A similar article deplored the rising material standard of living. "There is no greater calamity can befal any people, than when luxury is

[41] On community barter-exchange as precapitalist, see Merrill, "Cash Is Good to Eat," 54–61; in contrast, see Shammas, "How Self-Sufficient Was Early America?" 262–63.

[42] *Kentucky Gazette,* May 18, 1801.

[43] Will Book A, [1803]–1809, p. 75, Fayette County, Public Records Division. It was not possible, due to a lack of specificity in the estate inventories, to estimate how much of the cloth inventoried in individual estates was imported and how much had been produced for household use. A recent study of a Pennsylvania county estimates that only minimal textile needs could be met by local production. See Hood, "Organization and Extent of Textile Manufacture in Eighteenth-Century, Rural Pennsylvania," 194–207. John W. Hunt Daybook, Sept. 20, 1796; Patrick Scott interview by Shane, reel 76 (11 CC 8), Draper Manuscripts. On the gender and class dynamics of shoplifting a century later, see Elaine S. Abelson, *When Ladies Go A-Thieving: Middle-Class Shoplifters in the Victorian Department Store* (New York, 1989).

introduced among them, especially where it becomes general and is carried to so great a height, that every individual is under some necessity of living beyond his fortune, or incurring the censure of being avaricious."[44]

Such warnings about consumption drowned in a flood of advertisements offering the latest goods and styles from Philadelphia, Baltimore, New York, and even London. As artisans arrived in Kentucky, they announced their familiarity with the styles of the metropolis. Anthony Molloy, "Taylor and Lady's Habit-Maker," arrived in Lexington in 1792 and promised to re-create "the newest fashion now worn in Philadelphia or Baltimore." Thomas Christy, goldsmith and jeweler, sold rings and lockets for ladies "as elegant as those imported from Europe"; Reed and M'Ilvain, saddlers from Philadelphia, alluded to the opportunity they had had to improve "in their business, in the Capitol of England." Even the humble butcher, Andrew Steiger, advertised that he was "from Baltimore Town."[45]

Consumption of manufactured goods and metropolitan styles thus transformed the Kentucky backwoods into a consumer frontier: an economic border region situated between subsistence and capitalist modes of production, containing elements of both economic systems. A slave's exchanging raccoon skins for tea, or a woman's weaving homespun so she could wear nankeen, demonstrates local systems of mutuality and exchange yet challenges the image of yeoman living in a world largely uninfluenced by the capitalist marketplace. Queensware sold in log stores creates a dissonance in the frontier myth, much as the portrait of Priscilla Heale Calmes does by its portrayal of a fashionably dressed but rather tough-looking pioneer woman displaying for the viewer's gaze a fine English teacup and saucer. (See cover.)

What special significance, one wonders, did that cup and saucer hold for Calmes? What personal statement was she attempting to communicate in this extraordinary graphic expression? For that matter, what did the acquisition of tea, cloth, and fancy tableware mean to Miss Hite's Jack, Elizabeth Gillmore, and all those other backcountry inhabitants whose purchases we have scrutinized so minutely? Reconstructing the mental world of frontier consumers would at first seem an intractable problem. As one historian recently observed, "common settlers left comparatively little to tell us about their expectations and experiences"; those settlers who were African Americans and women have left even fewer traces of their perceptive universes.[46] How can historians speculate about the mentality of backcountry consumers when all that remains are the prosaic records of their economic behavior?

Borrowing insights from anthropology and sociology may be one way to approach this problem. While economists generally assume that people seek goods for only

[44] *Kentucky Gazette,* Oct. 20, 1787, July 12, 1788. On the fears of "luxury" in the 1780s, see Gordon S. Wood, "Interests and Disinterestedness in the Making of the Constitution," in *Beyond Confederation: Origins of the Constitution and American National Identity,* ed. Richard Beeman, Stephen Botein, and Edward C. Carter II (Chapel Hill, 1987), 69–109.

[45] *Kentucky Gazette,* Dec. 8, 1792, April 12, 1794, May 9, 1795, March 22, 1790.

[46] Gregory H. Nobles, "Breaking into the Backcountry: New Approaches to the Early American Frontier," *William and Mary Quarterly,* 46 (Oct. 1988), 641–70.

one or two purposes—subsistence or competitive display—anthropologists recognize that the acquisition of material possessions communicates a wide variety of cultural values. By viewing consumer goods only as necessities or superfluities it is easy to overlook their semiotic importance as metaphors for hospitality, shared rejoicing, sorrow, or even group identity. As Mary Douglas has observed, goods are part of a "live information system," neutral by themselves but charged with significance within a social context. Assembled together in ownership, they make "physical, visible statements about the hierarchy of values to which their chooser subscribes."[47]

On the consumer frontier imported textiles and ceramics contributed more than just variety, convenience, and beauty to pioneer homes: they carried social meanings and communicated relationships. For immigrants living in a cultural system in a state of flux, consumer goods obviously helped establish and enhance the complexity of social differentiation. While migration to Kentucky may have confused social rankings, it hardly did away with them. In transporting her punch bowl to Louisville, for example, Mary Walker Holloway carried along a social marker of her elite status in Virginia. By displaying her English teacup and saucer, Calmes proclaimed that twenty-four years in the back settlements had not robbed her of the social graces. In purchasing bohea tea, Miss Hite's Jack declared his familiarity with the rituals of the ruling race and, perhaps, his social distance from less sophisticated bondsmen.

Material possessions encouraged competitive display, but they also facilitated social integration, linking people in a fraternity of shared values. More than just a social marker, Holloway's punch bowl represented an emotional bond she sought to maintain with her old home. The attempts of other emigrants to keep up with fashions in Philadelphia or London suggest that imported consumer goods served a similar purpose. Re-creating aspects of the culture they left behind, whether through dress, food, or furnishings, may well have made the dislocations of frontier life more bearable for homesick pioneers. As part of a global diaspora stretching from Barbados to the raj, Anglo-American émigrés stubbornly retained modes of dress and dining often better suited to the British Isles than to their new homes. In T. H. Breen's felicitous phrase, this "empire of goods" eventually spread British tastes and products around the globe.[48]

Frontier consumers employed material objects to link them with the past but also to represent the future. Queensware dishes seemed out of place in a log house only until the owner plastered the walls and put up a chair rail. A farmer who turned his agricultural surplus into consumer goods expressed optimism that times were

[47] Mary Douglas and Baron Isherwood, *The World of Goods: Towards an Anthropology of Consumption* (New York, 1979), 10, 5. See also Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi and Eugene Rochberg-Halton, *The Meaning of Things: Domestic Symbols and the Self* (New York, 1981); and Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* (Cambridge, Mass., 1984). On the recontextualization of consumer goods to define group identity, see T. H. Breen, "'Baubles of Britain': The American and Consumer Revolutions of the Eighteenth Century," *Past and Present,* 119 (May 1988), 73–104; Christine Stansell, *City of Women: Sex and Class in New York, 1789–1860* (Urbana, 1987), 89–101; and Chris Waters, "Badges of Half-Formed, Inarticulate Radicalism: A Critique of Recent Trends in the Study of Working Class Youth Culture," *International Labor and Working Class History,* 19 (Spring 1981), 23–37.

[48] Breen, "Empire of Goods."

good and going to get better; cups and saucers were not much of a hedge against hunger and hard times.[49] Acquisitiveness, however, did not necessarily imply the absence of communal values. On the frontier tea drinking, punch bowls, and attractive clothing indicated an interest in hospitality and conviviality rather than the single-minded pursuit of capital accumulation. Endowed with value by fellow consumers, imported goods marked and lent importance to the rituals of social intercourse that knit together an inchoate society. Consumption and community grew up together in the backcountry.

The quest for a better life that led women and men across the Appalachians thus tied the Kentucky frontier into the Atlantic economy. Destiny was not always manifest, however, in the drawing of western political boundaries. As Peter S. Onuf has observed, "American policymakers looked west with mingled expectation and anxiety." Their challenge was to regulate westward settlement "in ways that would strengthen the union, preserve peace with the Indians and neighboring imperial powers, and pay the public debt while permitting enterprising settlers to pursue their own goals."[50] They almost failed. A cockpit of competing international interests in the revolutionary era, the Ohio Valley produced a bewildering variety of separatist schemes and conspiracies. At the end of the eighteenth century, deepening sectional conflict over the navigation of the Mississippi prompted widespread doubts about the survival of the Union. A border seemed to be forming along the spine of the Appalachians. Yet even as they talked of separation from the East in a Spanish conspiracy or a French conspiracy, western settlers struggled to retain a common language of material goods that bound them more closely with a national—even an Anglo-American—cultural system. Perhaps it is no exaggeration to suggest that consumers more truly plotted the course of the West than the political leaders of the time.

[49] On ordinary citizens working to "get ahead" and the commercialization of the countryside, see Gordon S. Wood, "Ideology and the Origins of Liberal America," *William and Mary Quarterly,* 44 (July 1987), 628–40; and Steven Hahn and Jonathan Prude, eds., *The Countryside in the Age of Capitalist Transformation: Essays in the Social History of Rural America* (Chapel Hill, 1985).

[50] Peter S. Onuf, "Liberty, Development, and Union: Visions of the West in the 1780s," *William and Mary Quarterly,* 43 (April 1986), 178, 181.